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FIVE BLESSINGS FOR OUR COUNTRY

PASTORAL LETTER FOR LENT 2024

For this year's Lent, we Bishops are proposing that as a country, and as Christians, we ought to reflect on the five gifts of God that Dun Karm Psaila, the national poet, reminds us of in Malta's national anthem: sound judgement, mercy, health, unity and peace.

“Guide me in your truth”

The first gift is sound judgement: the ability to understand, recognise and decide to choose good over evil. We pray the Psalm on the first Sunday of Lent: “Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me” (Psalm 25:4-5). God's word is a word of wisdom. It is not foolish. It will always do us good.

Wisdom and acting responsibly means setting aside self-interest in our decision-making. Wise people and responsible leaders take decisions that take everyone into consideration, including those who shall follow us. We need these types of leaders and citizens for our fine words regarding sustainability and inclusion to mean anything.

“Rich in mercy”

The second gift is mercy, through which we truly resemble God. As St Paul explains: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:4-5).

The Lord tells us that our love needs to be compassionate. This is encompassed in the word ‘mercy’. Being merciful means helping another in time of need, but it also means that your heart should always beat for your neighbour's heart.

Being merciful also means that—rather than judging, condemning, and destroying others on media and social media—you opt to see in every person the humanity we share that

truly makes us brothers and sisters. In a world where it is extremely easy to crush and 'discard' people through our words and actions, it would be good to ask how we Christians can be witnesses to the mercy of God, which, without ignoring the truth, always seeks to raise up those who are oppressed by the hardships of life.

During Lent, it would also be beneficial for us Christians to partake in the beautiful experience of God's mercy by frequenting the Sacrament of Confession, where we encounter the source of mercy.

“He healed all who were sick”

The third gift mentioned by Dun Karm in our national anthem is health which encompasses both physical and mental health, as well as spiritual health.

Another beautiful word of salvation that Jesus brings us through his death and resurrection from the dead is the word 'health' - *salus*. The word 'salvation' is an invitation to view our health holistically. Jesus cares about us. He wants what is good for us and yearns to heal us from our sufferings. During Lent and Holy Easter, Jesus will be among us as the Doctor of the Soul. We need to welcome Him into our hearts so that we may be healed.

At times, we should also pause for a moment from our rushed daily routines and look around us. There may be a colleague going through a tough time; a neighbour whose health has deteriorated; and a mother or father who have lost their job. Stopping to notice, listen, speak to and accompany someone who is suffering could be the greatest gift of charity during this period of Lent.

“There will be no division between you”

The fourth gift is unity which stems from our mutual respect and commitment to work together. This means pulling at the same rope, despite not always being in agreement about everything. It would be good for us to pray for the gift of unity among couples, families, within our parishes and also within the Church.

Let us also pray for unity among the people of our nation which this year celebrates 60 years of independence and 50 years as a republic. To advance as a society, we need to urgently rediscover the art of respectful dialogue. Dialogue, especially on a political level, is often considered a sign of weakness. Sometimes, we tend to prefer people who drown out the voices of others through verbal attacks, ridicule and hurtful language. Yet the quality of political debate is invariably poorer when we engage with each other in this manner. With such negative attitudes, the common good can never be served and we will certainly never achieve unity.

As the country gears up for local council and European Parliament elections, we encourage all who are involved in public and political life not to shy away from courageously choosing to listen humbly and engaging in respectful dialogue.

“I leave you peace”

The fifth and final gift we find in the Maltese national anthem is peace. At Easter, we remember the greeting of the Risen Lord: “Peace be with you!” (Jn 20:19). St George Preca also used to insist that we should greet each other in this way. However, peace does not merely emanate from our words or our lips. It must come from the heart. You cannot offer peace to another person if you do not have peace in your heart.

As Dun Karm stresses, peace is a gift from the Lord. We need peace in the world, peace among us, peace in our families, and peace in our hearts. You can be the richest person in the world in material terms, but if you do not have peace in your heart, you are a pauper. Those with peace in their hearts receive the greatest blessing bestowed by the Lord, whatever circumstances they happen to find themselves in.

It is easy for us to become disheartened by the many conflicts in the world today – in places like the Holy Land, Ukraine, Sudan and other regions. Nations’ leaders are the ones endowed with the power and responsibility to stop this absurd destruction. Nevertheless, we are also called to be bringers of peace. Peace or violence between us depend on the decisions—big or small—that we take each day. Peace is the fruit of good, responsible decisions. When we ignore truth and justice, when we think we are always right, and when success and money become our idols, we sow the seed of violence.

However, when we draw near to the Crucified Christ and the Risen Lord, and when we participate in the Lord’s school of love, we allow his peace to enter and together with him become bringers of peace.

Now that we have started this 40-day journey, our blessing for us and our country is Jesus’ own: peace be with you.

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